

Pre-9/11 terrorist threats cause White House chaos

By James Kuhnenn
and Jackie Koszczuk
Knight Ridder Newspapers

WASHINGTON (KRT) — Lawmakers from both parties on Thursday demanded an independent investigation into whether U.S. intelligence agencies properly assessed terrorist threats before the Sept. 11 attacks, and whether the White House responded properly to those threats.

National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice said the White House received a series of intelligence warnings last summer that Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda terrorist organization may be plotting attacks on U.S. interests. One analysis that Bush received Aug. 3, while vacationing at his ranch in Crawford, Texas, listed airplane hijackings as one tactic that bin Laden might employ.

"It was not a warning," Rice said. "There was no specific time or place mentioned."

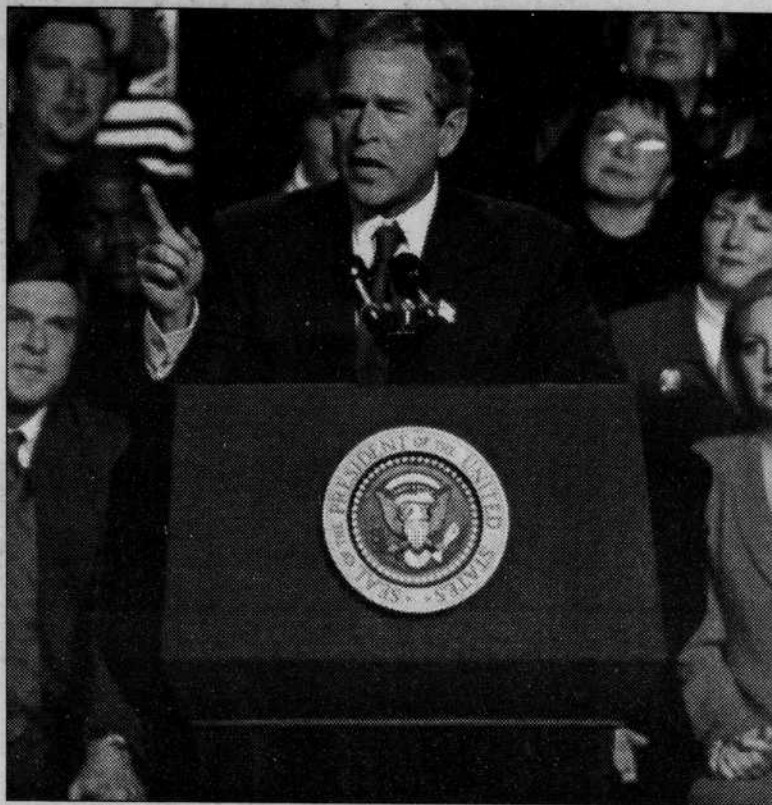
Behind closed doors with Senate Republicans at a private Capitol luncheon, Bush rejected any suggestion that he failed to act on information that would have prevented the Sept. 11 suicide attacks.

"Rest assured," Bush added, according to Sen. Pat Roberts, R-Kan., who took notes of the president's remarks, "we would have never sat back, and we would have attacked any adversary with all the force and fury of the American military."

Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., Bush's opponent in the Republican presidential primary in 2000, and Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., the Democratic vice presidential candidate in the general election, announced they would push for legislation to create a 14-member commission to investigate, whose members would be appointed by the president and Congress.

Eight other senators are co-sponsors, including Republican Charles Grassley of Iowa, the chairman of the powerful Finance Committee, and Democrat Evan Bayh of Indiana, a leading moderate in his party.

The panel would be similar to those formed after pivotal events in the past, such as Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, the assassination of President John Kennedy and the Iran-Contra arms-for-hostages scandal.



Thomas Patterson Emerald

President Bush, shown here speaking to an audience at Portland's Parkrose High School in January, strongly denied any prior knowledge of the Sept. 11 attacks.

Congress had clamored for such an inquiry directly after Sept. 11, and the Senate's Governmental Affairs Committee approved a bill in March. But it never went further, because Vice President Dick Cheney asked lawmakers to help the country stay focused on the battle against terrorism.

Congressional leaders then assigned the task of investigating the question to the Democratic and Republican members of the House and Senate intelligence committees. That panel is expected to report to Congress sometime this summer.

Sen. Bob Graham, D-Fla., chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said another investigation was unnecessary.

Intelligence Committee members "are not members of or captives of the intelligence community. We know something about the intelligence community, and that was one of the reasons we were asked to undertake this job," he said.

Bush said he detected "the sniff of politics" as congressional De-

mocrats demanded Thursday that he release details of the CIA's Aug. 3 briefing to the congressional intelligence committees. Democrats also called on the administration to make public a July FBI memorandum that warned of Middle Eastern men attending flight schools.

House Democratic Leader Richard Gephardt of Missouri said lawmakers should have been told about the intelligence reports long before now.

"What we have to do now is to find out what the president knew, what the White House knew about the events leading up to 9-11, when they knew it and, most importantly, what was done about it at that time," Gephardt said.

With the nation's news media joining Congress in furious attention to such questions all day, White House officials mobilized to brief senators privately and reporters publicly about the threat assessments that intelligence agencies compiled before Sept. 11.

Rice said the administration was in a heightened state of alert

throughout last summer, but that intelligence warned of an attack by bin Laden on U.S. interests abroad, not on American soil.

Democrats in Congress pointed out that the Aug. 3 notice of possible hijackings did not exist in a vacuum. They noted that a memorandum from a Phoenix-based FBI agent last July reportedly warned of a link between Middle Eastern aviation students and bin Laden.

They also noted that in August

FBI agents in Minnesota were busy investigating Zacarias Moussaoui, a French national who had been arrested after arousing suspicions at a flight school near St. Paul, Minn. Moussaoui is now under indictment on charges that he was a conspirator in the Sept. 11 attacks.

(Knight Ridder Newspapers correspondent Frank Davies contributed to this article.)

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